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President: Mr. Han Seung-soo ..... (Republic of Korea)

The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Agenda item 12 (*continued*)

Report of the Economic and Social Council

Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies for development

Mr. Nambiar (India): I would like to congratulate you, Mr. President, on having convened this special Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communications technologies for development. This initiative is a most timely one. We are grateful to the Secretary-General for his address to the special Meeting yesterday. We also benefited immensely from the keynote address by President Abdoulaye Wade of the Republic of Senegal. The Chairman of the Information and Communication Technologies Task Force also gave us some very useful ideas. We associate ourselves with the statement made by Venezuela yesterday on behalf of the Group of 77.

The subject matter of this special Meeting is of great importance for developing countries, which are keen to benefit from information and communication technologies (ICT) in their struggle to eradicate poverty and achieve higher standards of living. In the Millennium Declaration, our heads of State or Government agreed to work together to ensure that the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communication technologies, are made available to all. The United Nations took steps to bring this issue to the forefront. Indeed, the Economic and Social Council took the initiative of adopting a ministerial declaration in 2000, and gave it further consideration in its coordination segment in 2001.

We all recognize the immense potential of the ICT revolution, which is opening up new opportunities for growth and development. In many societies it is giving a new meaning to the term "empowerment" by seeking to make a difference to the lives of millions of people, enabling them to take greater advantage of emerging opportunities. The rapid advances in the field of ICT are showing us the potential for leapfrogging stages of technological development.

At the same time, it is unfortunate that we have not reached a consensus on ways to adequately harness the potential of ICT for assisting developing countries in their efforts to secure a better standard of living for their peoples. The digital divide threatens to further marginalize the economies and peoples of developing countries. Because of the pace of the revolutionary changes in the field of ICT, the divide is widening every day, demonstrating that the imperative for concerted action by the international community is a matter of the utmost urgency.

The United Nations has a crucial role to play in making ICT work for the promotion of the development efforts of developing countries by building a consensus at the global level and by securing a commitment at the political level for action in concert, on the basis of mutual benefit. The

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involvement of major groups and relevant stakeholders will no doubt greatly contribute to the success of our efforts.

In India, the information technology industry has registered a compounded annual growth rate of more than 42 per cent over the past five years. This is almost double the growth rate of information technology in many developed countries. During the fiscal year 2000-2001, the gross annual revenue of the information technology software and services industry in India was more than $8.2 billion. Exports contributed $6.2 billion to this figure — an increase of 55 per cent in dollar terms over the previous year.

The Indian software industry currently accounts for 2 per cent of our gross domestic product. This figure is projected to increase to 7.7 per cent by 2008. Its contribution to exports is currently 14 per cent — a figure that is projected to increase to 35 per cent by 2008. The performance of the Indian industry derives from its quality and its delivery of high-end requirements. A recent survey of giant transnational corporations reveals that one of every four obtains its critical software requirements from India. India also has the predominant share of companies which have received the Software Engineering Institute Capability Maturity Model Level 5 certification — industry recognition for the highest standards of quality in software development.

It is true that there are constraints to accessing knowledge, particularly by citizens and institutions of developing countries. In this regard, we subscribe to the view that it is necessary to develop human resources through education, including secondary and tertiary education, in order to be able to overcome these constraints. The social benefits of primary education are widely acknowledged, and therefore it is a worldwide goal.

The 2001 *Human Development Report* makes the point that today's technological transformations have led to an increase in the return on investment in secondary and tertiary education. This calls for another look at the strategies adopted with regard to education. The role of vocational training centres or information technology institutions that provide the specific skills demanded by the market is pivotal. It is the development of such skills and capabilities that attracts private investment, including foreign direct investment, which in turn contributes to economic growth and poverty reduction. To a large extent, the information technology industry in India owes its growth to the availability of an extensive pool of skilled manpower. Our information technology training industry has gross annual revenues of $400 million and an annual growth rate of about 40 per cent. We therefore strongly commend efforts by the United Nation system, particularly the funds and programmes, in providing technical assistance and capacity-building.

We need to enhance the role which can be played by the United Nations system in promoting technical cooperation among developing countries in the area of ICT for development. Knowledge flows more easily from one developing country to another because it is not the simple acquisition of technology that is important, but its internalization, adaptation and adjustment to local conditions. This adaptation and adjustment do not need to be restricted in the sense of appropriate technology alone. It can also involve the application of cutting-edge technology to stubborn problems and impediments to development. The Indian experience, in fact, embraces both of those possibilities. In this context, we would like to make a special reference to the collaborative project launched by India in Mauritius.

I would also like to refer here to the pro-people and pro-developmental role of ICT, as distinct from its wealth-generating role. We in India have embarked on the mammoth objective of "IT for All" by 2008, so that the benefits of this technology reach the common man, even in the most remote parts of the country. The specific measures being pursued include a mass campaign for information technology (IT) awareness, the establishment of IT kiosks to provide Internet access for all, the promotion of IT education in all schools and colleges, the establishment of national and state-level digital libraries and the promotion of IT for agriculture and integrated rural development, including through wired villages.

We are also committed to e-governance, which brings people and government even closer to each other. The first step we took was the posting by all government departments of information on their activities on the World Wide Web. The second was to move to a stage of interaction where inputs are sought from our people on government programmes and initiatives, with a view to their further improvement. The third stage, which is now under implementation, is

to allow for transactions between the Government and the people to be made electronically.

We recognize the important role that can be played by ICT in promoting development. Our own experience attests to this. However, we also recognize that ICT by itself cannot solve the problems of poverty and underdevelopment. As stated in the foreword to the last year's *Human Development Report*, the belief that there is a technological silver bullet that can solve illiteracy, ill health or economic failure reflects a scant understanding of real poverty. It is also our view that a judicious blend of emphasis on the provision of basic social, educational and health services and on the development of both brick- and click- industries, is required in any strategy for sustained human development and poverty reduction.

In conclusion, I would like to express the hope that this special Meeting of the General Assembly will provide realistic and action-oriented outcomes whose implementation will contribute to the preparatory meeting for the World Summit on the Information Society, to be convened in 2003 in Switzerland and in 2005 in Tunisia. We believe the Summit will provide a platform for world leaders to renew their commitment to bridge the digital divide, as well as to make a tangible difference in the lives of poor people in developing countries.

Mr. Goussous (Jordan) (*spoke in Arabic*): At the outset, I would like to say how much my delegation appreciates the efforts you have made, Mr. President, to convene this important Meeting as part of the preparations for the World Summit on the Information Society, which will take place in December 2003 in Geneva and in December 2005 in Tunisia. This illustrates the importance that Member States attach to the question of information and communication technologies (ICT). My delegation would also like to express its support for the statement made by the Minister for Science and Technology of Venezuela on behalf of the Group of 77 and China.

At the present time, no one is unaware of the potential role of information and communication technologies in helping to establish a global economy based on information and to realize the concept of global sustainable development. The revolution in communications has created admirable opportunities at a reduced cost, which represents an essential factor in fostering economic growth, improving the competitiveness of States and strengthening the integration of developing and least developed countries into the world economy. That requires all of us, developing countries in particular, to remove obstacles in order to make the best possible use of the opportunities provided by ICT in developing countries. In that regard, there is currently a particular lack of infrastructure, human resources and investment levels. It is also necessary that efforts be made at every level to bridge the digital gap between developing and developed countries, so as to create a real partnership that includes Governments, multilateral development institutions, the private sector and civil society.

My country, Jordan, has always been aware of the importance of using new technologies to promote our economic development and to make up for any lag in this field. In recent years, under the aegis of His Majesty King Abdullah, Jordan has been working to take advantage of every opportunity to utilize ICT. That has included providing education in computers and computer science, developing school curricula, encouraging training in the use of computers in various regions of the Kingdom, exempting computer equipment from customs fees and taxes and opening Internet centres throughout the Kingdom.

Convinced as we are of the importance of international cooperation in this field, His Majesty has at the beginning of this year put in place an information technology initiative to create a framework for cooperation among countries with various elements in common in terms of size, population, outlooks on information technology, research and development. This initiative is intended to provide a mechanism to help bridge the digital gap between the North and the South through successful models based on available human resources and on adapting countries to help them benefit from technological developments. Furthermore, this initiative includes an economic strategy to allow technology to make positive changes in the economic, social and political spheres and to strengthen cooperation among countries in various areas, such as education, training and human resources development.

My country is proud to have been chosen as a regional headquarters of the Arab Group for the Information and Communication Technologies Task Force created by the Secretary-General last year to develop proposals to bridge the digital gap between developed and developing countries and to create the

conditions necessary for everyone to take advantage of the opportunities produced by ICT.

Mr. Hidayat (Indonesia): On behalf of the Indonesian delegation, let me begin by expressing our appreciation to you, Mr. President, for convening this important two-day Meeting, and for your insightful opening statement. It is also with sincere pleasure that I associate my delegation with the statement made yesterday by the representative of Venezuela on behalf of the Group of 77 and China.

The importance of information and communication technologies (ICT) is well documented. Two years ago, the high-level segment of the Economic and Social Council recognized the central importance and vast potential of ICT for promoting development by putting it squarely on the agenda of the United Nations. Today, in this ongoing era of rapid globalization and interdependence, ICT has become one of the most potent forces in shaping the knowledge-based economy and the information society of the twenty-first century. My country, Indonesia, is no exception in its recognition of the power and potential of utilizing ICT in the service of development. However, we all must seize this opportunity with more vigour and enthusiasm than we have collectively shown to date.

While admittedly a great deal has been achieved, including the establishment of the United Nations ICT Task Force, it is also recognized that ICT poses major challenges and risks. Two years after the 2000 ministerial declaration of the high-level segment of the Economic and Social Council, we are still far from ensuring that the benefits of ICT are available to all. As stressed by the Secretary-General, the digital divide still yawns as widely as ever, with billions of people left unconnected.

In this connection, we agree with the analysis of the Secretary-General, who stated in his keynote speech yesterday that our efforts must be based on the real needs of the people, that we must find better ways to ensure their participation at all stages of implementation, and that our efforts must be sustained by strengthening the long-term commitment of the initiators and sponsors. Adequate resources must also be provided over the long term.

While recognizing the fundamental importance of market forces and the role of the private sector in meeting these challenges, we are also very much aware that these alone do not suffice to bridge the digital divide or to promote digital opportunities. Rather, we are convinced that concerted actions at the national, regional and international levels are imperative, particularly through the role of partnerships.

In addition, the financial resources allocated to the promotion of ICT in the service of development remain insignificant compared to the size of the task. These trends have been significantly aggravated by the impact of rapid globalization and liberalization. Nevertheless, in recent months, we have had a real opportunity to build on the successful outcome of Monterrey. We must, however, find ways and means to translate these promising pledges by the donor countries at Monterrey into effective measures for implementing the Millennium Development Goals.

It is therefore my delegation's wish that, following this two-day Meeting, we not only commit ourselves more deeply to the issue but also become better equipped in making the most of ICT for development. We should do so in particular by seeking to ensure that ICT applications penetrate all sectors of society and benefit all developing countries. In this context, let me also reaffirm Indonesia's full support for the efforts of the United Nations to promote digital opportunities in Africa and in the least developed countries.

Before concluding, allow me to share with the Assembly some recent ICT developments in my country. Increasingly aware of the potential of ICT, my Government has given it high priority. Like many other countries, Indonesia has taken several steps to improve our economic and political situation by leveraging ICT to set in motion a "virtuous" circle of sustainable development.

In recent years, the Government has instituted a number of ICT policy initiatives designed to promote e-leadership in Indonesia and to reform our telecommunication sector. Such initiatives involve, inter alia, the adoption of a series of e-government legislative acts that will help Indonesia to become more aligned with neighbouring countries in the near future. In addition, the Government has created a road map of activities for the implementation of e-government. This road map provides an evolutionary framework that incorporates current governmental activities and charts the course for achieving my country's e-government

vision and for reaping the full benefit of a mature e-government environment.

The following steps are to be taken. First, the Government will provide its citizens with the increased efficiency and socio-economic benefits that can accrue from having a comprehensive e-government programme — such as reduced corruption, increased transparency, greater convenience, revenue growth and cost reductions. Secondly, efforts will be made to bridge the current digital divide between Indonesia and more advanced neighbouring countries; and thirdly, we will work to improve Indonesia's competitiveness in the global economy by using e-government to remove non-tariff barriers to trade.

We fully realize that what we are trying to do is not an easy task. Rather, it is one of the most daunting challenges we have faced. However, we also realize that, by fully utilizing the role of partnerships between Governments, multilateral development organizations and institutions, the private sector, civil society and other relevant stakeholders, we can succeed in realizing our vision for the future of ICT connectivity, content and capacity.

Mr. De Alba (Mexico) (*spoke in Spanish*): Mr. President, my delegation is pleased to see you presiding over this meeting on a subject to which your country, and you in particular, have devoted considerable attention. The Mexican delegation commends you for this initiative.

We deem this initiative particularly valuable, as it is one of the first steps to be taken by the United Nations to begin the consideration of a global plan of action that promotes the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) as a vital tool to help achieve the sustainable development of our countries, and in particular of the developing countries.

In this regard, the Mexican delegation believes that the participation in this meeting of various governmental and non-governmental representatives who are particularly active in the area of information and communication technologies — among whom we would like to mention former President Figueres Olsen — gives us an opportunity to consider the development of a plan of action — not just hold a debate — on specific aspects and objectives that we could develop in the years to come, as we pledged to do when we adopted the Millennium Declaration.

A plan of action of this nature should take into account not only shortcomings related to lack of infrastructure and connectivity, but also structural problems related to education and training, which exacerbate social, cultural and economic inequality and which, of course, hinder people's access to these technologies.

Today information and communication technologies are not an option, but, rather, a real prerequisite for functioning in modern society and for becoming an active participant in the current economy. This makes us rethink the philosophy underlying public policy and governmental action not only in the context of national requirements but also in a global spirit, one that must be inclusive. In this respect, we need a consensus and the necessary tools to eliminate, at the global level, the growing digital divide between the developed and the developing countries.

Mexico is clear about the need to narrow the gap. To that end, in the context of the current Administration's national development plan, there is as public policy a national system to achieve

> "an integrated and fully connected society in which all Mexicans can live in a climate of equal opportunity, within Mexico and with the rest of the world, respecting and preserving pluricultural wealth".

We have called this programme the national e-Mexico system. It is a State project, not a government project. It is a project of the citizenry that includes education, health care, economic and government services, as well as other digital services to benefit the community. The national e-Mexico system is an initiative of President Vicente Fox and, through it, we are seeking to make a quantitative leap in development with a model of digital participation, or, in English, the "digital share".

This model means access to technology as an opportunity to modernize society and to bring valuable services to this new society. That is our reference point for arriving at the information society, and for that purpose we are making efforts in the sphere of infrastructure, since one of the basic objectives in this national model is to promote affordable connectivity among lower-income families and individuals in both urban and rural communities. For this purpose, the plan this year is to cover 2,445 municipal centres. It is

possible that my country's 10,000 main communities will be covered by 2006.

The national system's efforts are complemented by the establishment of a telecommunications coverage fund, the purpose of which is to increase the coverage, accessibility and diversity of telecommunications services. To this we would add the efforts being made in the area of content, in terms of e-education, e-health, e-economics, e-government and other digital services for the community.

By the end of the current Administration of Vicente Fox, this programme for the information society, which, as I have already said, is called the national e-Mexico system, constitutes our best contribution to the international recommendations that will surely be put forward at the World Summit on the Information Society to be held in 2003 and 2005. It should be noted as well that Mexico is taking this action with a view to establishing its national preparatory committee in order to participate actively and decisively in the preparatory process of the World Summit. Furthermore, Mexico has very attentively kept abreast of international recommendations on the information society and on information and communication technologies. It has expressed its views in various forums, such as the Millennium Assembly and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, and we have followed the recommendations of the Group of 15 and the Group of Eight, among others.

At the regional level, we have supported and have actively participated in the work done in this field at the Summit of the Americas, through its plan for the connectivity of the Americas, also known as the Quito Plan of Action. We have also promoted action in the framework of the Ibero-American Summit and in the Rio Group. In the Rio Group, in particular, we have supported the proposal entitled "Latin America towards the information society: the challenges of equity, competitiveness and employment".

In summary, we believe that Mexico's experiences in this field and its exchange of experiences with others can enhance the knowledge base so that we can design mechanisms that can help channel both our own and joint efforts in order to ensure improved access to information and communication technologies for the benefit of all our countries and others, the benefit of all societies.

We are convinced beyond a doubt that the World Summit on the information society will be an excellent opportunity for the world community to identify actions at the national, regional and global levels. In that way, we can rally together in the search for shared objectives, and, above all, for us to move forward in building a modern, connected, fair and prosperous society. These components are essential for a genuine new information society.

Mr. Ben Salem (Tunisia) (*spoke in French*): Mr. President, first of all, I would like to say how appreciative we are of your initiative to organize this important and timely meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT) for development. I am convinced that our collective thinking, in both plenary meetings and the round tables that will involve the participation of representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academic circles and the private sector, will undoubtedly promote a fruitful exchange and will help us make optimal use of new information and communication technologies, thus providing the necessary foundation for the success of the two stages of the World Summit on the Information Society to be held, respectively, in December 2003 in Geneva and in 2005 in Tunis.

My delegation would furthermore like to welcome the fact that this meeting, apart from taking up the question of exploiting the possibilities provided by digital technology in the new information society, is also taking up the problem of the digital divide in the context of globalization and the development process.

As the partial underpinning of the phenomenon of globalization, and the motive force for the dynamic process of economic progress, the integration of new technologies in an open society is a fundamental component on our path to modernity. Furthermore, each and every one of us will recognize today the crucial role of information and communication technologies in helping to stimulate growth, to promote sustainable development and to reduce poverty.

In the Millennium Declaration, which was adopted in New York in 2000, the heads of State or Government of the entire world pledged themselves "to ensure that the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communication technologies, ... are available to all" (*resolution 55/2, para. 20*).

It is for this reason that the integration of developing countries to a knowledge-based economy will provide new opportunities for economic growth and social development, particularly in the economic and trade areas, including the fields of e-commerce, the reduction of transaction costs, the propagation of investment opportunities, and facilitating access to knowledge and education at all levels of society.

In 1998, at the Plenipotentiary Conference of the International Telecommunication Union in Minneapolis, Tunisia took the initiative of proposing a World Summit on the Information Society. Our intention was essentially to establish a common understanding of what an information society means and to identify ways and means of reducing the digital divide, the outlines of which still remained to be defined. Thanks to the commitment of the President of the Republic of Tunisia and his determination to include his country in the world information society, a four-point strategy was drawn up, consisting, first, of the consolidation and modernization of communications infrastructure, including the relevant infostructure. Thus, for example, the access capacity to telecommunications networks rose from 3 per cent at the end of the 1980s to more than 15 per cent today.

The second part of the four-point strategy called for adapting the regulatory environment in the communications technology sector in order, on the one hand, to attain liberalization in that sector, and on the other, to develop all the environmental components made necessary by the introduction of new applications and new services such as e-commerce and telematics.

Thirdly, we are encouraging human resource development in the areas of training and the provision of production facilities for new information and communication technologies. Tunisia has adopted a plan to set up, by 2010, 10 specialized technology parks, which will be additional to the significant number of specialized university institutions in our country. The most striking outcome of that policy was the creation of the El Ghazala technology park, which specializes in software development and which now employs more than 300 engineers. As a result of that approach, a variety of national solutions have been developed to respond to the demands of the information world. These include the e-dinar — an electronic method of payment in Tunisian currency; a tool to underwrite transactions — we all know how important that can be; the Hannibal system; and tools to provide access to the new applications.

Finally, we are developing a new vision of regional and international cooperation and partnership. As a result — and given our openness to the outside world — Tunisia is playing, and will continue to play, the role of informed stakeholder so that the wealth of the information society can be shared as equitably as possible, in particular so that the developing countries are not excluded from what might become the most important revolution that humankind has known.

We sincerely believe that Tunisia's modest experience could serve as an example to developing countries that want to draw up national strategies for the creation of an information society. Furthermore, for that reason we are fully prepared to share our experience in the Euro-Mediterranean, African and Arab regions.

Tunisia has agreed to host the second stage of the World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in 2005, because we are firmly convinced that the Summit will enable us to develop patterns of cooperation that will help to reduce the digital divide and create new opportunities for developing countries and for all those who feel a renewed sense of optimism because of the upsurge of global solidarity.

Tunisian policy is designed to provide the most effective contribution possible to the development of a knowledge-based society through the worldwide acquisition of digital culture on a massive scale.

The United Nations, because of its universal and representative character, is in an ideal position to impart a genuinely universal dimension to efforts to bridge the digital divide and to make maximum use of the potential of information and communication technologies, thus putting them in the service of development for all and, hopefully, providing a vehicle for the elimination of poverty worldwide. In so doing, they can expect Tunisia to make a constructive contribution, specifically through the role that it intends to play throughout the process of organizing the two stages of the World Summit on the Information Society.

In conclusion, I should like to inform the Assembly about the progress that has been made so far in preparing for the two stages of the Summit. An informal process is now being undertaken in Geneva

that, even as I speak, is preparing for the first meeting of the Preparatory Committee, which will be held in the first week of July in Geneva. Important — indeed, essential — steps have been taken to ensure the success of the forthcoming Committee meeting, in particular the setting up of a Bureau for the first phase of the Summit. The number of States involved is now known. The Bureau is now functioning on a provisional basis. Furthermore, all the rules of procedure for the first stage have been drawn up. We hope that the first Preparatory Committee in Geneva will be a resounding success that will guarantee the subsequent success of the other two meetings and, of course, of the first and second stages of the World Summit on the Information Society.

Mr. Isoun (Nigeria): On behalf of my delegation, I would like to congratulate you, Mr. President, on the excellent way in which you have been handling the proceedings of this Meeting. You have brought your immense experience and professionalism to bear on the process, thereby ensuring smooth and speedy interaction. We would like also to congratulate the Secretary-General, the President of the Economic and Social Council and the Secretariat for their commitment to the goals of sustainable development.

Nigeria welcomes this Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT) for development. My delegation subscribes fully to the statement made yesterday by Venezuela on behalf of Group of 77 and China.

It is no longer a matter of debate whether ICT offers unprecedented opportunities for social, economic, political and cultural exchange. Rather, judging by the statements made in the Assembly, we can draw a simple conclusion: the emergence and convergence of information and communication technologies are at the centre of global socio-economic transformation.

However, the African continent, marginalized during the past millennium, remains incapacitated and is unable to benefit meaningfully from the third great human revolution: the information technology revolution. This is because of the dearth of the requisite infrastructure, manpower, resources and technological know-how, as well as the prevalence of natural disasters, conflicts and other negative factors.

Only last Friday, Sir, you presided over the first meeting of the organizational session of the Ad Hoc Committee of the Whole on the Final Review and Appraisal of the New Agenda for the Development of Africa in the 1990s. In your statement you said:

> "As we are all aware, African development has become one of the most daunting challenges for humanity to cope with in the new millennium. In particular, such issues as the eradication of poverty, the fight against HIV/AIDS, conflict prevention and the preservation of the environment in Africa are major tasks for the United Nations to undertake, reflecting the aspirations of all mankind."

Those illuminating words strike at the heart of the African situation. It is bleak, it is scary and it is challenging, but it is not insurmountable. The report of the Group of Experts on the New Agenda paints a dismal picture of a continent in distress. When we add the information revolution to the mix, we may be tempted to think that there is no hope for Africa. The much talked about digital divide manifests itself in many ways in Africa. First, there is a paucity of fixed telephone lines — not just in Nigeria but in Africa as a whole. The same is true of mobile lines, Internet services and terrestrial television, radio and other communication services. Secondly, as the Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union said in his statement yesterday, the cost of telephone services from Europe to Africa is exorbitant and, quite simply, unaffordable for the most vulnerable sector of Africans: the poor and marginalized. We are aware that emerging technologies such as broadband wireless, satellite communication and mobile telephone systems offer hope for Africa to leapfrog into the knowledge-driven global information society.

In realization of the great potential and promise of ICT, the present democratic Government in Nigeria, under the leadership of President Olusegun Obasanjo, has declared ICT a national priority for development. With a population of 120 million and three tiers of government — comprising the federal Government, 36 states and 774 local government councils — teledensity and connectivity are very low. This will suggest, in itself, the existence of a huge market and investment opportunity in Nigeria and, I dare say, the whole continent of Africa.

To achieve its ICT objectives, the federal Government has taken the following actions: the liberalization and deregulation of the communications

sector; the licensing of three global system for mobile communications (GSM) operators; and the issuance of fixed wireless access to 34 operators, covering the 36 states and the federal capital territory of Abuja, to stimulate universal access and bridge the rural-urban divide. Plans to license a second national operator in Nigeria have reached an advanced stage. In addition, the Government has embarked on specific projects such as information technology parks, open university and distance learning for human resource development, virtual libraries, rural community centres, mobile rural community centres, local content development, telemedicine and hardware and software development.

In 2001, the Government of Nigeria approved a national information technology (IT) policy with its implementation agency. The vision of the policy is to enhance Nigeria's IT capability and to use it as a veritable engine for sustainable development and competitiveness. ICT has immense potential for poverty eradication, the creation of jobs, the provision of health services, natural disaster mitigation, human resource development, good governance, commerce and finance; and the list goes on.

My delegation commends the efforts of the United Nations in establishing the ICT Task Force. It also commends the Group of Eight (G-8) for the Digital Opportunity Task Force, described yesterday by Canada. We also commend President Wade of Senegal, a motivator and a visionary leader, for his commitment to the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). He graced this meeting with his presence yesterday. Nigeria is a major stakeholder and player in the New Partnership for Africa's Development. Pursuant to NEPAD's objectives, a home-grown e-Africa commission is a major component of the bold NEPAD initiative. What is left is to secure the requisite global support for NEPAD to become a reality. For this to happen, I understand that there is an urgent need for regulatory and legal frameworks, transparency, accountability, the rule of law, security of investments, respect for human rights, gender equality and sensitivity, public-private partnerships and popular participation. Nigeria is certainly addressing these issues.

My delegation expects the current ICT for development meeting and the forthcoming World Summit on the Information Society to keep in sharp focus the Doha Declaration and the Monterrey Consensus, given the commitment of the international community to turn words into action for achieving sustainable development. In particular, there should be linkage between the outcome of the World Summit for Sustainable Development and that of the World Summit on the Information Society. In this connection, I share the views expressed yesterday by the representative of Sri Lanka. We have heard many sweet-sounding words; now is the time to act. Furthermore, it is my hope that new and additional resources will be provided for capacity building, poverty eradication, education and the provision of shelter, food and health services. I am convinced that the call for debt relief specifically to fund development projects such as ICT is not too much to ask for developing countries.

Mr. Barrera (Panama) (*spoke in Spanish*): It is an honour to address the General Assembly on behalf of the people and the Government of the Republic of Panama, led by Her Excellency Ms. Mireya Moscoso. On their behalf, I would like to congratulate the United Nations on the holding of this Meeting, which we hope will strengthen the work of Member States in the pursuit of equitable development through the timely application of the new technologies of the information and knowledge society.

At a time of astonishing growth in new technologies, meetings such as this one have revealed the growing differences that exist between developing nations and the countries in which those technologies are developed. That is not because those technologies cannot help developing nations to solve some of their social and economic problems, but because never-ending internal and external debts and failed macroeconomic programmes have perpetuated the dilemma of having to direct their efforts to remove the basic elements of poverty, such as poor health and inadequate food. To break free from that dilemma it is vital, then, that these nations receive disinterested support so they can make proper use of the new technologies for their development.

While it is developing programmes to alleviate poverty, Panama is also extending the coverage of public health services and fostering open dialogue to modernize education, employment, social security and governmental management. Panama has sought to bring information and communication technologies to all sectors of the country, especially to those that are greatly challenged socially and economically.

Some 40 community Internet access centres have been set up; but we need 100 such centres by next year, when we will celebrate our centennial as an independent country. Those community centres, which we call infoplazas, cover the whole of our small country, and are the result of joint efforts by government, local civil society and the private sector; they were devised so that our children, young people, professionals and producers who do not have access to computers will have access to, and can share in, the information needed to develop new knowledge and develop their own communities.

To that end, five years ago our Government set up the first neutral connection point in Latin America so that Internet service providers could keep traffic in mutual data local, something that has saved them millions of dollars. However, some of those providers are stifling some of the Internet access community centres I mentioned through rising connection fees, which were supposed to be reduced after the privatization of our telecommunication system.

The Panamanian Government is also making the final efforts required to connect our schools to the Internet through other means, including connecting to national and international digital libraries and connecting our universities and research centres to Internet2. For the latter project, Panama has received initial support from an international telecommunication company that is today in bankruptcy. We expect further support from the private sector, as access to this new network is intended to facilitate research and to create and exchange new knowledge.

New alliances have been made with private sector ICT giants. These alliances have made possible the establishment of schools and training centres for digital literacy programmes for our young people and professionals who would otherwise not be able to receive training or to update their skills. Many of these alliances were made without exclusive commitments, which will allow us to set up training programmes for the use and development of open and free-source systems and applications in the same places where proprietary programmes are in use.

Since last year, Panama has had a Digital Signature Law for the support of e-trade as well as a law on the development of calling centres. Panama is also working to modernize its government services for the citizenry through its modest electronic programme, known as e-Panama. We are also elaborating a national strategy to help us in working towards the achievement of an information and knowledge society.

We believe that, given our reputation as a maritime crossroads of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, we could become the new digital crossroads of the Americas. Five underwater fibre-optic cables traverse our isthmus, transmitting in just a few seconds all of the data generated in all of Latin America in a day. Nonetheless, at the present time those cables are not having a direct impact on the social development of our country's marginalized rural or urban sectors, but we sincerely hope that the situation will soon change.

We are also in the process of using information technology to create effective tools to mitigate poverty and to achieve social and human development, which our peoples so richly deserve. We are working day by day towards that objective, but, like all developing countries, to do this we need the support of others — developed nations and the private sector alike. In order to generate support in our country and in the region, we propose, among other things, the following projects, which could be duplicated in other parts of the world.

First, we propose a pan-American multimedia centre for distance learning and training, so that students and educators in the public schools can have access to multilateral, interactive distance-learning education programmes from the developed countries, and so that new, low-cost distance learning technologies can be developed.

Secondly, we suggest the creation of an ICT help desk for the Americas, in order to integrate support — which is currently dispersed — for the sustainable development of telecentres, information centres and community Internet centres. This would help support a pan-American network of this type of community Internet centres.

Thirdly, an inter-American digital library network could connect all the digital libraries of the Americas through a grid infrastructure model. Access to such a network would be free of charge for our students, who themselves would contribute local content to these digital libraries.

We know that, given the changes taking place in information systems every three to six months, millions of upgradeable, recently manufactured computers are being discarded by the developed countries that could

be used in the schools of the developing and poorer countries. Clearly, there is a great deal to be done. The doors are open, and the developed countries and industry are invited to step in and contribute generously, with a sense of commitment. They should not be misled by deceptive statistics on gross national product in offering their support.

Panama, in accordance with these proposals, commends and supports global and regional initiatives on the use of ICT for development and expresses the sincere wish actively to participate in and to share its experiences with initiatives such as the United Nations ICT Task Force and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization "Information for All Programme". Both of these are preparing for the Summit on the Information Society, to be held in Geneva in 2003 — our 100th anniversary — and in Tunisia in 2005.

We hope that this Meeting will lead us to an early consensus on concrete action towards common development for the neediest peoples, so that we can say in a decade that the efforts made today to achieve a just and equitable society — especially as regards information and knowledge — were worthwhile, and so that we can be proud and certain that future generations of children and young people will benefit from today's efforts to bring about a better world.

Mr. de Moura (Brazil): As we all are aware, technology is a fundamental tool for development and economic growth. The evolution of information and communication technologies (ICT) has generated new opportunities and allowed countries to leapfrog stages in the development process. Nevertheless, not all countries have been able to benefit from these opportunities.

Not long ago, the Internet was used mainly by governmental and academic institutions. Nowadays, it is so widespread that, according to some estimates, by 2005 there will be more than 700 million users, and more than $600 billion will be spent on e-trade every year.

Although we usually focus on the economic impact of ICT, its importance can be felt in many areas, such as governance, health, education, poverty reduction and culture.

It is unfortunate, therefore, that these technologies are so unevenly distributed. Four out of five Internet users live in developed countries. Most developing countries still lack the basic elements necessary to develop and use information technology. Investment in infrastructure, development of capabilities and generation of adequate content can be achieved only with a combination of national strategies and international cooperation.

In this context, the United Nations has a unique role to play in bridging the digital divide and in defining the conditions in which the diffusion of information technologies may take place. This is why initiatives such as the ICT Task Force and the present Meeting are so relevant.

In our view, there are some essential actions that must be carried out in a joint effort by the public and private sectors, at both the national and international levels. They include: design and implementation of public programmes aimed at ensuring access by the population to information and communication technologies-related products and services; encouraging the development of technology-based firms through the creation of mechanisms such as venture capital funds, technology incentive zones and business incubators; the adoption of measures aimed at reducing the cost of communication services; the strengthening of technology institutions with a view to generating and diffusing regional and national content; and the promotion of regional cooperation.

The Brazilian Government has been successfully implementing initiatives regarding the diffusion of the Internet. As of 1995, almost all universities and research centres in Brazil were interconnected. In the ensuing five-year period, the Brazilian Internet market has skyrocketed to encompass 600,000 domain names and over 7 million individual users, connected through 300,000 hosts. International censuses available on the Web indicate that Brazil ranks thirteenth in the number of hosts. A total of 1,200 new domain names are registered every day in Brazil.

A new cycle of Internet infrastructure and services in Brazil is now being implemented by the Information Society Programme, coordinated by the Ministry of Science and Technology. Its main objectives are to expand economic activities based on the intensive use of information and communication technologies, in particular e-commerce, and to increase the number of Internet users in the country by reaching all segments of the population. Current plans include

the interconnection of all public libraries and the creation of thousands of community access centres throughout the country. In order to achieve those goals, high priority is attached to investment in education.

We are aware that connectivity, although essential, is not sufficient. Investing in human resources remains critical to ensure access to information and knowledge, as well as to turn this knowledge into new capacities. In addition, the importance of the development of local content cannot be overstated, as it is vital in ensuring not only wider access but also the preservation of diverse cultural, ethnic and linguistic identities.

We are also using the Internet to promote a more efficient and transparent government administration. In some government services, such as online income tax declaration, the issuance of personal documents and election to public office, positive effects can already be observed in the form of significant gains in transparency, reliability, speed and integration of all social groups. We also believe that an adequate strategy for the implementation of the information society requires respect for the objectives of social and economic equity, as well as for democracy and human rights.

At the international level, Brazil has actively taken part in many forums, such as the ICT Task Force, the Group of 15 and the Rio Group. We also look forward to participating in the World Summit on the Information Society to be held in Switzerland and Tunisia.

This is a moment of great dynamism and creativity, with great potential for improving the lot of individuals and countries. Only the active cooperation of all stakeholders can bridge the digital divide and turn this potential into reality.

Mr. Requeijo Gual (Cuba) (*spoke in Spanish*): My delegation wishes to associate itself with the statement made by the representative of Venezuela on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. We are living in an era of technological revolution, when information and communication technologies (ICT) give countries the possibility of real-time access to all events the world over and the possibility of obtaining information on the most recent technological advances. But this contrasts with the asymmetries and the imbalances caused by the process of neo-liberal globalization, at which time we are witnessing an increase in levels of poverty, ill health and illiteracy.

The majority of the world's population is still living in poverty, and the technological divide between developing and developed countries is widening by leaps and bounds. Data from the International Telecommunication Union indicate that 62 per cent of telephone lines are in just 23 developed countries, covering under 15 per cent of the world's population. Eighty-four per cent of subscriptions to cellular service, 91 per cent of all fax machines and 97 per cent of Internet servers are located in developed countries. These figures are alarming.

The countries of the developing world have limited financial resources, and they must devote these to combating poverty, malnutrition, disease and illiteracy in order to give priority to their economic development. They do not have the human resources or the infrastructure they need in order to obtain the benefits of the technological revolution.

The generation of electric power and its distribution through power grids is not yet available to one third of the world's population. Two billion persons still lack basic, vital, low-cost medicines, and illiteracy levels remain high. How can we ensure that the new information and communication technologies will reach all countries if the developing world first needs to resolve burning needs, such as ensuring appropriate nutrition and health levels, preventing people from dying of hunger and disease, eradicating illiteracy, bringing education to all levels of the population, attaining qualified human resources, reducing levels of poor health and increasing access to energy, among other things?

It is obvious that there is a need for radical change and decisive action on the part of the international community, which would thus make it possible for the developing countries to be participants and beneficiaries in this revolution. It is essential that the international community provide assistance to the developing countries to remove some of the obstacles that they face, such as the lack of infrastructure and education, and to promote capacity-building, investment and connectivity. There is a need for effective cooperation among all international players in order to enhance the effects of information and communication technologies on development, thus enabling the transfer of technology to the developing

countries on preferential terms — above all, knowledge-based technologies — so that our own countries can develop their human resources.

For more than four decades now, Cuba has been the victim of an ironclad, brutal, economic, commercial and financial blockade imposed by the Government of the United States. In spite of major resource limitations and restricted access to advanced technology, we are conducting a strategy to introduce information technologies into all spheres of society. Of utmost priority is the training of human resources and, in particular, of our young people. Computer clubs for young people, institutions that we have throughout our country, have been established with the requisite equipment and teachers to provide free computer education to children and young people. Computers have been installed in all primary and secondary schools in Cuba to develop children's skills at an early age and prepare them for information technologies. We have established technological and computer schools, which are training thousands of young people in the basics of computer science and electronics. They are needed to bring about increased computerization in all spheres of society, which is so necessary in this new era of informatics and communications.

Our country supports the holding of the World Summit on the Information Society, which will be held in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2005. We hope that the Summit will lead to concrete actions and initiatives making it possible for developing countries to be integrated into global technological progress, so that they can extract their peoples from the poverty and marginalization in which they now find themselves.

The President: In accordance with the decision taken by the General Assembly at its 101st plenary meeting, held on 17 June 2002, I now call on the observer of the Holy See.

Archbishop Foley (Holy See): Mr. President, as you prepare, within just a few moments, to leave for Rome and the Holy See to see Pope John Paul II, may I anticipate the warm welcome you will receive, and may I hope that you will have a safe and fruitful journey.

The Holy See is very pleased that the General Assembly is devoting a meeting to the consideration of information and communication technologies (ICT) for development. As one might expect, the Holy See is most interested in the human and moral implications of such development. Reflecting upon the communications media, His Holiness Pope John Paul II has noted that the most essential question raised by technological progress is whether as a result of such technology each person can become

> "truly better, that is to say, more mature spiritually, more aware of the dignity of his or her humanity, more responsible, more open to others, especially the neediest and the weakest, and more ready to give and to aid all".

In our commendable concern to make information and communication technology available to the broadest range of persons possible, I would hope that we might remember three basic moral foundations of communication: the overriding importance of truth, the dignity of the human person and the promotion of the common good. Those principles formed the basis of studies on ethics in advertising, in communications and in the Internet published over the past five years by the Pontifical Council on Social Communications, copies of which I am happy to leave with the Secretariat.

The Holy See, in the name of Vatican City State, was privileged to take part in the World Telecommunication Development Conference in Istanbul in March, and to make a number of the following observations. Bridging the digital divide requires that measures be taken to end the unjust discrimination dividing the rich from the poor, both within and among nations, on the basis of access to the new information and communication technologies. Another divide operates to the disadvantage of women, and it, too, needs to be closed.

Mr. Shobokshi (Saudi Arabia), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The extension of basic telecommunication services to the entire population of developing countries is a matter of justice. Long an aspiration, it is still far from the reality in too many instances, and this threatens to render futile any discussion of the introduction of the new ICTs. Nevertheless, the principle of universal service in telephony should be extended to provide for access to basic online services at reasonable tariffs.

ICTs propel and sustain the process of globalization, leading to a situation where commerce and communication are freed from the restraints of national frontiers. This can create wealth and promote

development, but there has been an unequal distribution of the benefits. While some countries, as well as corporations and individuals, have greatly increased their wealth, others have been unable to keep up, or have even become poorer. Worse, there is a perception in some countries that globalization has been imposed upon them and that it is a process in which they are unable to participate in any effective way.

While globalization has both positive and negative effects, we can only agree with those critics who have pointed out that, as regards the new ICTs, the result has been a widening of the digital divide between developing and developed countries. It follows that individuals, groups and nations must have access to ICT in order to share the promised benefits of globalization and development and not fall further behind.

The transfer of technology is not merely a matter of making equipment available, but of spreading the necessary training and information. The role of knowledge is fundamental in the development of telecommunications. This delegation agrees that priority should be given to increasing the knowledge base of the inhabitants of the least developed countries, and that the need for an investment in education goes hand in hand with the need for investing in the telecommunication infrastructure.

The Holy See believes that development must be understood not solely in economic terms, but in a way that is fully human, concretely enhancing every individual's dignity and creativity. Education for development should not merely fill heads with information, but ought to release the creativity of the human person.

Without unduly caricaturing attitudes, it can be said that developing countries wish to acquire the technological capacity for independent development while the industrialized countries aspire to the role of technological leadership and seek to expand their markets. Thus, on the one hand, there are those who consider that technology should be freely shared for the common good, while others see technology as private property. In the international arena it need no longer be a question of opposing camps: the opportunities for generous compromise and fruitful cooperation are available.

His Holiness Pope John Paul II, in an address to the Secretary General and to the Administrative Committee on Coordination, spoke of a growing sense of international solidarity that offers the United Nation system

> "a unique opportunity to contribute to the globalization of solidarity by serving as a meeting place for States and civil society and a convergence of the varied interests and needs ... Cooperation between international agencies and non-governmental organizations will help to ensure that the interests of States — legitimate though they may be — and of different groups within them, will not be invoked or defended at the expense of the interests and rights of other peoples, especially the less fortunate."

The Acting President: In accordance with General Assembly resolution 33/18, of 10 November 1978, and decision 54/453, of 18 December 1998, I now call on the observer for the International Organization of La Francophonie.

Mr. Dehaybe (International Organization of La Francophonie) (*spoke in French*): With the onset of the information society, we are experiencing a fantastic evolution in modes of communication. The means now available to us challenge our habits, alter the way we relate to others and force us to abandon guideposts, what we have learned and what we know. While this international trend has aroused curiosity, enthusiasm and hope, it has also, as we know, raised questions, as it has revealed a certain trend towards exclusion. La Francophonie has chosen to take part in the information society, but with a desire to change its contours and to push them towards what it considers to be desirable and important: towards promoting cultural diversity and valuing linguistic plurality.

A number of forces, as well as civil society, industry, business and government — all working towards different ends — are vying with each other for a dominant position. A great deal remains to be done to ensure that the acquisition and use of information and communication technologies has an equitable impact on society in the long term. It is quite clear, however, that those who integrate the most rapidly into this information society have a greater chance of determining the nature of that impact and its specific features.

Thus there is much at stake. The work of this special Meeting of the United Nations is extremely timely with respect to defining the challenges ahead, exchanging experiences and arriving at a common understanding in preparation for the World Summit on the Information Society, to be held in Geneva in 2003 and in Tunis in 2005.

The participation of actors from civil society and from the private sector in the international process that has been initiated by the United Nations and the International Telecommunication Union is clear evidence of the fact that a determination exists to forge new kinds of partnerships based on complementarity.

Civil society and the private sector have shown that they could be vehicles for strategic stability in those sectors where they are deeply involved. Strengthening their actions will make it possible to induce a large number of stakeholders to engage in development efforts, which can contribute to a lasting kind of cooperation.

It has been pointed out by all speakers in this Meeting that the least developed countries are almost entirely absent from statistics on digital data flows. The digital divide is not so much a technological issue as a social one. The prevailing inequality in terms of accessing information, contributing to its elaboration, accessing knowledge and networks, and benefiting from the development potential offered by technology only exacerbates economic and social exclusion.

Inadequate access by the poorest countries to information technology could therefore further intensify their marginalization. Because of a lack of network infrastructures, high access costs, inadequate training and a dearth of local content, they may not be able effectively to utilize the information available on the Internet, or to use it to express their cultural viewpoint or create content that reflects their environment.

Yesterday, President Wade quite rightly recalled that Africa attaches high priority to information and communication technologies in the content of the New Partnership for Africa's Development. A strong international consensus and external support are necessary with respect to the strategic underpinnings of this New Partnership. It is imperative immediately to undertake actions that will allow for synergy and for a sharing of experiences in order to learn about demultiplier effects at the national, regional and international levels. La Francophonie, for its part, has pledged to support the new strategy that is being elaborated by African leaders and to assist in its implementation.

To prevent the digital divide between rich and poor countries from growing even wider, la Francophonie is working to mobilize the efforts of individuals and of States, using private and public institutions as intermediaries, in order to work together to develop measures, projects and the skills that will enable the least developed countries to integrate more effectively in the information society. This strategy involves public and private partnerships as well as partnership with civil society, which will make it possible to elaborate and implement projects that will facilitate access by the least developed French-speaking countries to information and communication technologies.

Through these cooperative actions, la Francophonie intends, inter alia, to support the implementation of national and regional strategies in the least developed countries; organize regional meetings on strategic issues; develop free software for French speakers; strengthen efforts related to training and to the transfer of knowledge; safeguard and make accessible cultural heritages; emphasize individuality through the creation of local content; and promote the use of national languages, in particular African languages, in a multilingual digital society.

But in a world in flux, there is yet another crucial issue. Education and training today are increasingly being viewed as commodities in a global market which must be conquered. Knowledge is being bartered in a competitive environment. Various commercial strategies are being developed. New actors have appeared, such as high-technology corporations, and partnerships are being created. Educational centres are under threat. We must therefore be vigilant and mobilize to ensure that education does not become a commodity that is subject to the laws of the market, like any other commodity.

At a time when cultural diversity is the focus of discussions being held in major international organizations, and because of the risk of cultural uniformity posed by the globalization of exchanges and the shift towards an information society, la Francophonie decided to make its voice heard and thus

devoted its third Ministerial Conference on Culture, which was held in Cotonou in June 2001, to this issue.

At that time, we adopted a declaration and a plan of action. The ministers reiterated the importance they attach to cultural diversity and their will to devise the necessary policies and instruments to ensure its safeguarding and promotion. That effort is set in the context of initiatives on the subject, in particular those undertaken by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, whose outstanding role in the area of cultural diversity should be stressed.

Consisting as it does of 55 States and Governments representing five continents and a population of 500 million, and with a wealth of varied cultures and a common language — French — in addition to national languages, la Francophonie is truly a laboratory for cultural diversity. It is a generator of proposals and a forum for discussion, and it intends to share its experiences and to make its contribution to international thinking on the information society.

At a time when forward-looking plans are being devised to make up for the fact that the least developed countries are lagging behind in terms of equipment and access, it is essential that the international community — with the same degree of determination — should mobilize to make the information society one that is genuinely pluralistic and richly diverse.

We cannot overemphasize the fact that the risk of the commercialization and uniformization of education — and thus the potential to disregard or deny specific heritages — is an issue that should be at the very centre of our thinking in terms of what should be accomplished at the Summit in Geneva and in Tunis. These ideas, I think, are at the very heart of our battle.

The Acting President: In accordance with the decision taken by the General Assembly at its 101st plenary meeting, held on 17 June 2002, I now call on the observer of Switzerland.

Mr. Furrer (Switzerland) (*spoke in French*): First of all I would like to express my thanks for the invitation to this General Assembly meeting on information and communication technologies (ICT) for development. I thank the President for organizing the meeting; it is very opportune, since we have started in earnest to prepare for the World Summit on the Information Society, and since it is taking place two weeks before the first meeting of the Summit Preparatory Committee and two weeks after the first African regional conference in Bamako.

(*spoke in English*)

Let me recall that on 3 March this year, the Swiss people voted in a referendum and agreed to Switzerland joining the United Nations. One might say that it was about time, and one would certainly be right, but better late than never. So, of course, we expect that on 10 September of this year, the General Assembly will vote on Switzerland's entry into the United Nations. We certainly look very much forward to that day.

Looking back on two days of intense discussions on the opportunities ICT may offer, we have to admit that this immense potential has not yet been tapped. The Secretary-General said it clearly in his opening statement at this meeting of the General Assembly: the digital divide is wider than ever. Therefore, we have to ask ourselves: What are we to do? What are the next steps to be taken?

The next step in discussing this subject at a high, global level will take place at the World Summit on the Information Society. Switzerland has the honour of hosting the first phase of the Summit in Geneva in December 2003; the second phase will take place in Tunisia in 2005. Let me assure the Assembly that Switzerland is committed to contributing to the success of that event.

What does Switzerland expect of the Summit? We would like it to show the international community how to use information and communication technologies as a means towards solving the problems of the world. In spite of the most modern ICTs, the world still has many problems that have hardly changed over the past 30 years. We have the most sophisticated ICTs, but we still have hunger, illiteracy, a lack of international understanding and terrorism — and many new problems must be added to that list. We are seeking a vision of how ICT can make a concrete contribution to overcoming these problems. And we are seeking a vision of how to help bridge divisions or gaps between people. With technological progress and the application of ICT, the divisions between rich and poor, town and country, young and old, men and women, educated and uneducated, North and South, and so forth, have

become wider, not narrower. That is the digital divide and it is, unfortunately, a reality.

Rather than making connections, ICT is creating new divisions. For example, the cost of a computer in Bangladesh represents eight times the average annual income, whereas here in New York it is less than the average monthly wage. Another graphic example of the digital divide between North and South is that only 17 per cent of the world's population lives in industrialized countries; yet, 88 per cent of Internet users live there. ICT should be helping to overcome precisely the disadvantages of people who live in the country, people who are poor, old, sick or disabled. The World Summit on the Information Society must show how these divides can be bridged rather than being made even wider. It should show how all people can be provided with access to ICT. In that respect, we do not just want to speak of divides — that is true — but also, or mainly, of the opportunities that ICT can offer. Let us highlight these opportunities as well: that is also an important task of the Summit.

During the past two days, I had the opportunity of meeting colleagues from the Secretariat, and from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other United Nations agencies. Those discussions were very interesting indeed. They suggested new avenues for making the best possible use of ICT. Let me give an example: the fight against HIV/AIDS. ICT can be used to make children aware of risks, and it gives them the right to know, even if — and this is sadly the case — adults try to block information about AIDS and its prevention. That is only one example of how the United Nations agencies — all aspects of the work of the Organization — must be involved in the preparation and work of the Summit.

It is difficult to keep track of all the positive initiatives with regard to the information society. It is therefore understandable that people ask what it is all about. Whenever anybody asks me what the aim of the World Summit is, I try to convey the following message. I say that it is about bringing all these good ideas and initiatives together and creating one common plan of action, a plan of action with one important caveat: it needs to be focused and realistic so that it can be implemented.

The World Summit will be the first summit on the information society with universal participation. Its success will therefore depend on a coordinated effort by all actors, because the Summit offers a unique opportunity to develop and implement a policy declaration and an action plan to promote the information society from a coordinated perspective. We consider such an approach essential if the Summit is to succeed. We have to work in a coordinated manner; otherwise, it will not work. We have to cooperate at all levels: between Member States and the United Nations, with the ITC Task Force, of course, at its centre, and with all the United Nations agencies, as well as with the international financial institutions — the World Bank and the regional development banks — and with the World Trade Organization, because the best plans amount to nothing without a plan for financing. We attach particular importance to the active involvement of UNDP in this process. All these actors need to cooperate during the preparations, during the Summit itself, and above all, in the implementation of the decisions taken at the Summit.

However, Governments and international organizations will not be able to achieve any tangible results without the active participation of the other stakeholders in this field: the private sector and civil society. That is what makes this Summit different from other summits, since the private sector is the driving force of ICT development. As one can see with the Internet, for example, it is not Governments that are the driving force; it is something very private, very democratic and transparent, I would be inclined to say. Resolution 56/183 recognizes this particular situation and attaches great importance to the participation of civil society. In the final analysis, it is civil society — citizens, industry, consumers and academics — who apply ICT, be it as users, consumers or producers. Only in this way can we incorporate concrete and substantial recommendations into the action plan.

What are Switzerland's focal points for the Summit? Aspects of development policy are of central importance for Switzerland. However, we do not seek to offer a single remedy, but rather to find customized solutions. We are well aware that not everything that is good for Switzerland or other industrialized nations is also good for the developing nations, so, there can be no universal remedy here.

In addition to bridging the digital divide, there are other important aspects, such as support and

promotion of cultural diversity, protection of intellectual property, prevention of the misuse of the Internet — such as child pornography — consumer protection and security. However, aspects such as freedom of information, pluralism, transparency and respect for human rights are founded on democracy, including in the virtual world. In that regard, ICT should help to promote these democratic values. Freedom of information is a central axiom of the information society, as it will be at the World Summit on the Information Society.

The aim must be to create a win-win situation with regard to ICT. The private sector contributes a lot to the building up of ICT infrastructure in developing countries, thus contributing to the improvement of quality of life in those countries. At the same time, we are convinced that the private sector also stands to gain by setting up that universal service. The challenge will be to find innovative ways of financing this endeavour in order to set an example for successful public-private partnerships so that both sides profit: civil society — the people living in those countries — as well as the private sector, because — and here we have to be realistic — otherwise the private sector will not be engaged in this field.

To conclude, ICT sounds very technical, even technocratic. However, we want a policy summit, not a technology conference. I call on all Governments and on all United Nations organizations and agencies to make the World Summit a policy and political summit. I wish to stress that it is a United Nations summit, and not an International Telecommunication Union summit.

In our role as host country, Switzerland is fully committed. We will do everything in our power to ensure that all United Nations Members and specialized organizations can grasp the challenges of our time, and that civil society and industry can participate actively.

The Acting President: We have heard the last speaker for the Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies for development.

In accordance with the decision taken by the General Assembly at its 101st plenary meeting, on 17 June 2002, I now give the floor to Mr. Jean-David Levitte of France, Chairman of the second informal panel, to present his summary.

Mr. Levitte (France) (*spoke in French*): I had the privilege of presiding, with Ambassador Anwarul Chowdhury acting as moderator, over a panel whose subject matter is of concern to all of us, namely, what the United Nations can do to help African countries and the least developed countries make progress in the field of information technologies. The panellists and the keynote speaker were from the real world — the business world — and they shared their experiences with us. I should mention that three out of five speakers were women. I think that is something that is very important to emphasize. From their experiences in Africa, we were able to draw a number of very important conclusions.

First of all, evidence illustrates something obvious: that information technologies not only can, but must be, placed at the service of the development of Africa and of the least developed countries. The only real question, therefore, was how the United Nations system can help to establish these technologies in the countries of Africa and in the least developed countries. Today the system is being truly mobilized. What we see in New York, and this meeting of the General Assembly, bear witness to that. But all speakers emphasized that such mobilization is seen also in the specialized agencies and United Nations offices throughout Africa and the least developed countries.

Obviously, the first role of the United Nations system is to see to it that equitable rules are put in place and respected worldwide. The system that is steadily being established with regard to the rules of the game needs to work in such a way that does not penalize African countries and the least developed countries. But, above and beyond this general statement of fact, what struck us as we heard representatives of the private sector was that, in their view, Africa and the least developed countries are not the subject of generosity or compassion. Rather, they constitute emerging markets where the private sector is prepared to invest for profit: to make money.

The whole question was therefore how to help create conditions in the least developed countries that can encourage private investment. The unanimous answer was that this could be done by building partnerships among Governments, agencies of the United Nations family and the Bretton Woods institutions, the private sector, civil society and non-governmental organizations. I would also add to that

list universities, which can play a very important role. There is no single recipe, no universal rules of the game for establishing such partnerships. On the contrary, as we listened to the speakers it seemed clear to me that the key words were diversity of solutions, flexibility — which is indeed needed in implementing solutions — pragmatism and imagination.

Several speakers emphasized the fact that the first task was to bring information technologies into universities and schools, as well as to train educators so as to have a young generation in Africa and in the least developed countries who are connected and open to the world through new technologies. But such flexible partnerships must also be extended to three very important areas.

They must be extended to the economy, of course, as African economies need to be connected to the global economy through information technologies. They must also reach public administration, as good governance can make major strides through information technologies. In fact, we had a brilliant Ethiopian speaker who explained to us how the Parliament in Addis Ababa was able to work much more effectively once new technologies were installed; this also applies to provincial and big-city administrations. Lastly, partnerships should also be established in the fundamental sector of health, where very rapid progress can also be made in African and least developed countries through information technologies.

In conclusion, there is really just one obstacle: the financial obstacle. Information technologies require electricity; they require people who can read and write. But even if those two basic conditions are met, it is not enough, because connection costs in Africa, in the least developed countries, are 12 to 20 times higher than in the United States or in Europe.

Therefore the main obstacle that needs to be overcome today is that of connection costs. Solutions have been found in two complementary areas: first, deregulation, in order to open up to the private sector investments in infrastructure; and secondly, cooperation between the United Nations system and the Bretton Woods institutions.

Because some infrastructures will never be handled by the private sector, there will always be a need for official assistance. In this respect, it is important to emphasize that the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations system have come up with billions of dollars in investments every year to respond to these needs.

All in all, this was an extremely exciting panel, because it allowed us to hear about concrete experiences, something that I think we in New York need. I wish, on behalf of all of the participants, to thank all of those who spoke, who contributed a great deal.

The Acting President: In accordance with the decision taken by the General Assembly at its 101st plenary meeting, on 17 June 2002, I now give the floor to Mr. Abdul Mejid Hussein of Ethiopia, Chairman of the first informal panel, to present his summary.

Mr. Hussein (Ethiopia): Like my colleague, the Ambassador of France, I had the privilege of chairing the first panel, whose theme was how information and communication technologies (ICT) leverage development to meet the Millennium Summit goals, building on multi-stakeholder partnerships for promoting digital opportunities.

We also had a very, very lively and interactive discussion. We had very distinguished panellists, some directly from the field, others involved in global affairs — even a former President and a former Foreign Minister, who had previously taken a keen interest in ICT matters. I do not think that I can fully do justice to such a lively discussion in a few minutes, but I will try.

We started by listening to a video introduction by the Secretary-General that said, "the information age has dawned, but not yet for all". These are the words of the Secretary-General, and they speak volumes. Panellists, representatives, and private sector and civil society participants focused their discussion the issues of leverage and multi-stakeholder partnerships. Participants recognized that the key issues concerning ICT were not technological but pertained more to purpose, governance, mindset, leadership, policy, vision, willingness and resources. ICT was recognized as a great tool, but one that required the proper environment to make it effective.

ICT could have considerable leverage in promoting development and reducing poverty, but there were many complications to be overcome. Most immediately it was noted that the countries with the lowest levels of telephone and Internet usage had the highest phone connectivity and bandwidth costs.

A particular concern was how to merge the goals of business and development. Business interests naturally focus on earnings — I think we all know this — and therefore attention has to be given to emphasizing the market opportunities of development. Participants devoted a great deal of attention to the ways in which improved communication technologies, especially the Internet, could facilitate the work of Governments, and conversely it was noted that Governments needed to put online a great deal of content of use to their citizens.

E-governance was seen as leading to customer-centred solutions, and it was felt that Governments could learn from the private sector in this regard. ICT could lead to information-sharing, more democratic and accountable government functions, expanded commerce and many other things, but not always and not with a level playing field.

Similarly, ICT could have greater gender benefit but only in relation to equitable access. Hence we found that, actually, leverage is not a simple matter.

We looked at the opportunities as well. Just to give an example, the panellist from Hewlett-Packard emphasized that the assets and competencies that a company such as her own brings to the equation include deep ICT expertise, a solutions-based approach, inventive capability, an extensive talent base, proven business methodologies, credibility, access to other organizations, and, lastly, limited social investment funds, i.e. resources for philanthropy. In fact, in this connection, the Assembly is aware of the World Economic Forum's Chief Executive Officer Charter, which aims to set aside, hopefully, 20 per cent of such resources for philanthropy.

Emphasis was placed on devising multi-stakeholder partnerships. The United Nations and public officials should in particular call upon the expertise and other competencies of the private sector. On the government side, examples were given of ways to save money and speed administrative work through the use of ICT.

Even taking into account start-up costs, short-term benefits could be identified from the experience of some speakers. ICT can be a win-win proposition if business interests realize that bridging the digital divide in developing countries is good business, producing more customers, more purchases and higher living standards. When this happens, of course, it is certainly good for business. Here mention was made of a world with a market of 6 billion people.

It goes without saying that having such a market with developed economies all over the world is in the interest of the private sector. So, as Ambassador Levitte, Chairman of the second panel, stated, it is actually not a question of talking about least developed countries and other developing countries going after grants or asking for official development assistance with a begging bowl, but it is a question of making the free market truly free.

Here I would like to recall something that was raised earlier: the developed economies, particularly the powerful ones, talk a lot about the free market, but they are also very ready, for domestic political purposes, to be among the first to actually block it by subsidizing their farmers with billions of dollars. I do not need to mention which countries are involved.

We have looked at the constraints and the challenges. We have also looked at numerous problems that beset the introduction and expansion of ICT to leverage development. We have all agreed that there is not one digital divide; there are several — rural-urban, young-old, rich-poor, white collar-blue collar, and so forth. Therefore, access is key, but access alone is not sufficient. Basic problems include electricity, general infrastructure, computers and other devices, skilled users and content. Moreover, ICT alone does not lead to development. It needs to be integrated into other efforts with adequate financing and skills from various quarters.

Other problems include resistance to change — the mindset — and hoarding of information by those in charge of it at all levels. This is often found not only in Governments of developing countries but also in some developed countries. Another problem is the lack of understanding of system requirements and the various costs of the totality of changes involved. There may be a feeling that the costs are unaffordable, that the purposes are unrealistic and that ICT is a luxury for poor countries with limited infrastructure and budgets. That is another opinion that was expressed.

I will now state our conclusions, starting with an opinion that was expressed on the government side. ICT must be recognized as a necessity, not a luxury, in government budgets. It is not an alternative to other expenditures but is a requisite tool for development. We must have ICT for education, health, government

administration and finance, among other things. On the business side, ICT should be seen as an area for converting development concerns into business opportunities. This is something I referred to earlier. Thus, ICT can leverage development as businesses see the merit of overcoming the digital divide — or divides — in relation to customers, investments, savings and earnings. Government also has the role of encouraging and shaping business interests, and the private sector and civil society have important roles in innovation and income-generation. Leadership is thus very important at all levels. Such leadership helps to shape the policy agenda and the implementation of innovation, and leads to the generation of an expanding supply of local content.

Finally, the participants agreed that a growing partnership among the United Nations, the private sector and civil society is important for leveraging development through ICT, and that this meeting of the General Assembly could offer an important impetus to further that end. Our moderator, Mr. José Maria Figueres Olsen, summed up a general concern when he said, "We must not be so busy with the urgent that we neglect the important."

That was a summary of almost three hours of a very lively interactive discussion. I am sure that all the points expressed during our meeting may not have been included in my summary, but I am quite confident that the highlights of all the important aspects that we discussed were incorporated in my statement. I am sure all participants are in a hurry to go, so I will stop here.

The Acting President: I now have the pleasure of delivering the concluding statement of the President of the General Assembly.

> "On behalf of the General Assembly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all of you who participated in this two-day Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies (ICT) for development. The participation of the President of Senegal, the Secretary-General, the President of the Economic and Social Council, the Chairmen of the United Nations ICT Task Force and the Group of Eight (G-8) Digital Opportunity Task (DOT) Force, the Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union and a large number of ministers, as well as the high number of speakers at the four plenary meetings, clearly showed the importance you are attaching to this topic. I am also grateful to the panellists, keynote speakers and lead discussants, many of them coming from the private sector and non-profit organizations, for sharing their views with us during the two informal panels.
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> "Let me take a few moments to highlight the major issues of our discussions by way of concluding remarks. Please note that I will not provide details on the two informal panels, as we have just been briefed on their outcome. The meeting was briefed on the work accomplished by the United Nations ICT Task Force and the G-8 DOT Force in preparation for the World Summit on the Information Society.
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> "Our Meeting, which aimed at fostering digital opportunities for all in the emerging information society, was recognized as an important and timely initiative, especially in the light of a persistent digital divide between developed and developing countries, as well as within countries.
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> "The ICT revolution is opening new opportunities for economic growth and social development. A wide consensus has emerged on the potential of ICT to promote sustainable growth, to combat poverty eradication, to strengthen democratic governance, to contribute to the empowerment of women in reducing gender inequalities, to promote the active participation of disabled and elderly persons in socio-economic development, to bridge the distance between rural and urban populations, and to significantly strengthen the global fight against diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria. In short, ICT is a strategic instrument for achieving the Millennium Development Goals. However, ICT for development is still underused in many parts of the world. The digital divide threatens to further marginalize the economies and peoples of many developing countries, as well as countries with economies in transition. The challenge of transforming this digital divide into digital opportunities requires international commitment and cooperation.
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> "The United Nations and other international organizations are recognized as a catalyst in fostering digital opportunities and putting ICT at

the service of development. The adoption of the Ministerial Declaration of the 2000 high-level segment of the Economic and Social Council, which was subsequently endorsed by the Millennium Summit, provides the framework for the efforts of the United Nations in that regard. The General Assembly, the most universal and representative body of the United Nations system, is recognized as a forum for evolving a meaningful, action-oriented and coordinated response by the international community to bridge the digital divide, thus helping to achieve the development goals of the Millennium Declaration.

"The Meeting also welcomed the establishment of the United Nations ICT Task Force, which is becoming a key forum on how ICT can help achieve the Millennium Development Goals and on promoting policy coherence and coordination among international initiatives. The valuable contributions made by the G-8 DOT Force in raising awareness, linking networks and promoting multi-stakeholder initiatives were also emphasized.

"The Meeting recognized the significance of multi-stakeholder partnerships for leveraging development with the use of ICT. Many participants emphasized the importance of collaborative partnerships among Governments, civil society and the private sector in order to ensure that the benefits of ICT become available to all. The private sector has a key role in developing and disseminating ICT. Governments are responsible for providing transparent regulatory and legal frameworks that integrate the specific needs of developing countries. Civil society can bring a broader, participatory and inclusive approach to ICT development. And all stakeholders, as the Secretary-General stressed in his important intervention yesterday, should nurture their multi-stakeholder initiatives to ensure their effectiveness and long-term sustainability, including by providing adequate resources.

"Developing countries are well aware of their ICT needs for national development, but require support from the international community to fulfil those needs. We must provide adequate resources to realize digital opportunities for developing countries and countries with economies in transition. Cooperation between developed and developing countries is thus one crucial element for bridging the digital divide, but the potential of collaboration among developing countries — South-South cooperation — should also be fully explored. At the same time, regional collaborative efforts should be recognized and promoted. For example, the President of Senegal shared with us, in his keynote speech yesterday, the challenges faced by the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) in achieving economic and social development objectives. ICT has been recognized as one of the main priorities of NEPAD. These regional initiatives need full international support.

"It was stressed that our deliberations will also make a significant contribution to the forthcoming World Summit on the Information Society. The Summit will be a major opportunity to discuss measures to be taken to bridge the digital divide and to use the full potential of ICT to reach the Millennium goals.

"In conclusion, I must express my satisfaction with the most substantive discussions we had over the last two days. We have stressed the importance of ICT for development and reaffirmed our commitment to mainstreaming ICT in development issues. The realization of the potential of ICT for development requires broad international commitment from political leaders to act in concert. It is up to us to bridge the digital divide and turn it into a digital opportunity. I look forward to our continued cooperation in bridging the digital divide."

The Meeting of the General Assembly devoted to information and communication technologies is now concluded.

The meeting rose at 5.35 p.m.